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❀ 8 ❀

THE MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE OF KHARPERT

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Over the past century, a specific set of monuments has come to define the study of Armenian architecture. Buildings such as the martyrium of Hripsime, the Cathedral of Ani, and the church of Aghtamar appear repeatedly in scholarly publications.[1] While certainly deserving of our attention, these structures represent only a fraction of the corpus of medieval Armenian architecture.[2] Such a selective approach to the primary material is understandable, particularly in the case of Western scholars, for whom it is easier to consult academic publications than revisit the monuments themselves. Yet it has also caused a distortion in the field: countless medieval buildings in historical Armenia have received no more than a single scholarly study; some, none at all.[3] Despite their anonymity, these structures are often as rich in historical and architectural significance as their more celebrated kin, and their consideration is crucial to understanding not only the artistic traditions of medieval Armenia but also the historical and social

[1] I wish to acknowledge here my extensive use of one of the most valuable tools for students of Armenian architecture: *Armenian Architecture: A Documented Photo-Archival Collection on Microfiche for the Study of Armenian Architecture* (Zug, Switzerland: Inter Documentation, 1980-1990). This microfiche collection, available in a number of American research libraries, was created under the direction of Vasken L. Parsegian and edited and written by Krikor Maksoudian and Lucy Der Manuelian. For the area of Kharpert, see volume 6, fiches A-3001 to A-3084.

[2] For two examples of the best-known Western surveys that feature these monuments, see Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *Armenian Art* (Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1978), and Jean-Michel Thierry and Patrick Donabédian, *Armenian Art* (New York: Abrams, 1987).

[3] For the development of the scholarly literature, see Christina Maranci, *Medieval Armenian Architecture: Constructions of Race and Nation* (Louvain: Peeters, 2001).

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contexts in which these traditions emerged.

The medieval architecture of Kharpert provides an important case in point. The region's numerous monuments, both military and ecclesiastical, not only exhibit the familiar forms and techniques of Armenian architecture but also provide insight into the social and cultural make-up of the local community, which was shaped by continuous contact with non-Armenians.[4] In antiquity the area was known as Tsopk or Sophene and formed part of the Artashesian/Artaxiad and Arshakuni/Arsacid kingdoms. In the sixth century, after a period of semi-autonomy, it became an administrative unit of Byzantium, and in the following century formed a buffer zone between Byzantine and Arab forces. After the battle of Manzikert in 1071, the land transferred from Byzantine to Seljuk hands. Despite short periods of local rule, the following centuries saw further invasions by Mongols, Mamluks, Kara Koyunlu and Ak Koyunlu Turkmen (Turkomans), Timurids, and then by petty Muslim dynasties.[5] With the establishment of Ottoman rule, the Armenians of Kharpert were able to build a relatively prosperous and stable community, which was sustained until the time of the genocide.

The Fortress/Citadel of Kharpert

One of Kharpert's most striking medieval monuments is the large fortress perched on the summit of a rocky hill above the city. It is believed to have been founded in the Urartian period and then rebuilt under the Armenian kings of Sophene, after which it underwent several further phases of renovation before the nineteenth, when it was used as a local quarry.[6] Documentary photographs from the 1970s reveal a relatively well-preserved structure, whose circuit wall is still clearly visible from the city below (Fig. 1). In most sections, the walls still retain their massiveness, measuring about 2 meters (6.5 feet) in height and about 1.5 meters (5 feet) in depth, and are constructed, like the interior chambers, of large stone blocks facing a rubble core. The fortress features the characteristic elements of Armenian military architecture, which

[4] An extensive historical overview, as well as bibliographical literature, is provided in *Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3001, B9-C5.

[5] In 1507, the town was attacked and looted by Shah Ismail of Persia.

[6] For further discussion of the fortress, see *Armenian Architecture*, A-3001, C1.

have been laid out in numerous publications by Robert Edwards.[7] The perimeter of the structure does not conform to a geometric design, but instead follows the natural spurs and outcroppings of the ground upon which it is built. Also characteristic are its rounded towers, or bastions, which appear intermittently along the circuit walls. Their rounded shape discourages "sapping," a term referring to the technique of excavating a wall corner in order to cause it to topple. The design of the main gate is also typical of Armenian building techniques: placed flush with, rather than perpendicular to, the fortress walls, it renders intruders vulnerable to the attacks of soldiers perched on the wall-walks above. Other defensive measures include a network of subterranean passageways which connects the internal chambers of the fortress to nearby villages.

The Churches of the Region of Kharpert

Little remains of the several churches within the former city of Kharpert, including Surb Karapet, Surb Stepanos, Surb Astvatsatsin, and Surb Hakob.[8] Interestingly, Surb Astvatsatsin reportedly was given to the local Assyrian congregation in return for a sanctuary in the village of Morenig.[9] Most monuments in the district no longer preserve their original form, a consequence of extensive renovation, conversion to mosques, or, at worst, acts of deliberate destruction. Farther from the city, some 70 additional Armenian churches and monasteries survive in one form or another. Among the most important examples, because of their architecture and historical connections, are the churches of Khulavank, Surb Nshan at Tsovk, Datem (Tadem), and Til.[10]

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[7] See, for example, *The Fortifications of Armenian Cilicia* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987), and "Medieval Architecture in the Oltu-Penek Valley: A Preliminary Report on the Marchlands of Northeast Turkey," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 39 (1985): 15-38.

[8] According to Maksoudian, Surb Stepanos was converted into a mosque in the eighteenth century. In the following century, the Armenians were allowed to erect a church next to it, which they dedicated to the same saint (*Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3001, C2). Other churches include Surb Nshan and Surb Sargis. A brief commentary on these and other monuments in the vicinity, as well as further references, appears in *Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3001, C1-C3.

[9] The subject of church exchange is fascinating for its cultural, social, and anthropological ramifications, and the Kharpert case would benefit from further study.

[10] Other area monasteries include Surb Gevorg, Surb Parsam, Surb Mamas near

The Monastery of Khulavank

The Monastery of Khulavank is located near present-day Elazığ (Mezre).[11] According to tradition, the complex was founded by the apostle Thaddeus and has also been connected to the Movsisavank monastery mentioned by the tenth-century historian Stepanos Taronetsi.[12] However, the first concrete documentation connected to Khulavank is provided by an inscription on the church portal, which states that a certain Husik renovated the church in 1301.[13] Evidence for activity at the church during this era is also confirmed by numerous thirteenth- and fourteenth-century tombs surrounding the structure and by a striking archaeological discovery. In the 1830s, renovators at the site uncovered a bottle of chrism that bore the seals of King Hetum of Cilicia and Catholicos Nerses Shnorhali from the thirteenth century.[14] The monastery's prominence as a religious and cultural center, suggested by this find, was sustained from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century when numerous manuscripts were copied there. The site remained an important pilgrimage destination until the Armenian Genocide, after which it was converted for use as a barn.

The Khulavank monastery includes a church, a hostel, monks' cells, and a nineteenth-century orphanage, built after the 1895 massacres. Judging from the 1975 photograph of Gundolf Bruchhaus, the church functions today as the ground floor of a house (Fig. 2). No doubt transformed through renovations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in its present state it is unimposing: a small rectangular structure faced with randomly-coursed, uncut stones. The portal is located at the west end of the south wall, and the doorposts are articulated by ashlar masonry arranged in a long-and-short pattern, which is topped by a monolithic arched lintel (Fig. 3).

Keserig, and Surb Gevorg of Sursuri.

[11] For extensive discussion of this site and further bibliography, see *Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3083, A1-A4.

[12] Ibid., A2.

[13] Ibid. The inscription states: "This fountain of light [referring most likely to the church] was rebuilt in the name of the *oikonomos* [steward] Husik in the year 1301." For a discussion of the dedication of the church, the identity of the patron, and additional epigraphic records, see *Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3083, A1-A3.

[14] Ibid., A2.

The interior of the structure conforms more to that of a medieval Armenian church (Fig. 4). Centrally-planned and domed, the space is divided into a nave and two side aisles by four pairs of free-standing supports, which, in turn, carry the vaulting. The apse, flanked by two-storied side chambers, is preceded by the domed bay, which is supported by a pair of columns at the west and attached piers at the east. The interior is furnished with inscriptions, which are located on several of the column capitals, and is decorated by a program of wall painting of uncertain date.

The Monastery of Surb Nshan

One of the most picturesque sights in the Kharpert region is located on a small island in Lake Goljuk (Hazar Gölü), where the ruins of an Armenian monastery rise from the water's surface (Fig. 5).[15] Now referred to as Yilan Adası (Snake Island), the group of structures was once known as Surb Nshan and formed a functioning monastery until the 1820s, when lake levels rose to flood the island. Despite its conspicuous appearance, little information survives regarding the history of the monastery, and opinions diverge on the circumstances and date of its foundation. The earliest surviving reference is found in a fifteenth-century colophon.[16] However, more is known about its recent past: at the time of the flood, the monastery's relic, a piece of the Holy Cross, was transferred away from the site. Even after its watery destruction, the complex still attracted local Armenians, and it was a popular destination for the celebration of the Assumption of the Virgin. In 1909 an effort towards reconstruction was made, but it was aborted at the time of the genocide. For a brief time, according to Krikor Maksoudian, the site formed a refuge for survivors of the atrocities.[17]

Our knowledge of the physical appearance of Surb Nshan is derived from the documentary photographs of Bruchhaus, dating from 1975, as well as from local oral history. It appears to include several arched and barrel-vaulted chambers, constructed from brick or thin stone slabs

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[15] For further commentary and references, see *Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3085, A1-A3.

[16] The site is also mentioned in the account of the famous traveler Simeon Lehatsi (*Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3085, A3).

[17] Ibid., A1.

between courses of mortar (Fig. 6). According to local sources, the superstructure of the main church was domed and built of stone, and furnished with inscriptions as well as relief sculpture.[18]

The Monastery of Datem (Tadem)

The village of Mezrazi, lying to the south of Elazığ and northwest of present-day Tadım, is home to an architectural complex that scholars believe is identical to the Monastery of Datem. The history of the site is rich. It was founded, according to local tradition, by the apostle Thaddeus and in the seventh century may have been the seat of the bishop of Fourth Armenia.[19] However, the earliest documentary references to Datem occur in seventeenth-century colophons. Until 1915 the monastery possessed significant holdings of land, had jurisdiction over nine area villages, and was an important site and destination for pilgrims.

Today, the monastery stands in a dilapidated state amid an overgrown forest. Enough remains of the structure, however, to convey an idea of its original appearance. In plan, four arms radiate from the central bay, with a rectangular antechamber, or *gavit*, at the west end (Fig. 7). Because of the random coursing of its exterior walls, as well as the use of significant amounts of mortar, this chamber is believed to be of a later date. By contrast, the original masonry, evident at the south end, features smooth, well-cut, and closely-joined facing stones sandwiching a rubble core (Fig. 8). The structure is topped with a dome on a wide, short drum, which, like most of the elevation, has been virtually stripped of its facing slabs.

The only entrance occurs at the extreme south, just west of a small rectangular chamber of indeterminate function, which may, like the gavit, postdate the rest of the complex. The portal leads onto the gavit's interior, which is square and marked by four columns, dividing the space into three aisles. At their summit the columns form slightly pointed arches, which, in connection with wall corbels, provide support for the barrel vaults above (Fig. 9). At the east end of the gavit,

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[18] According to Maksoudian, the epigraphy and reliefs were revealed in 1922, when the waters of the lake temporarily receded.

[19] *Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3086, B3-5.

two rectangular chambers flank the entrance to the church.[20] The arches are faced with smooth, well-squared ashlar, while the walls and ceiling are composed of uncut stones and heavy mortar.

The church is essentially tetraconchal in shape, its semi-circular arms each topped with semi-domes and pierced with an arched window. At the intersection of the arms is the domed bay, illuminated by four further arched windows just below the drum. As the photographs of Bruchhaus attest, this superstructure stood until at least 1975. Both the interior of the gavit and the church preserve traces of plaster and paint, and groups of incised crosses, most likely the efforts of pilgrims, appear on both the inside and outside surfaces (Fig. 10).

The Churches of Til

Three medieval churches once stood in the village of Til (Korluca), located along the Upper Euphrates (Murat Su) in the district of Charsanjak, northeast of Kharpert. Maksoudian suspects that the structures were destroyed in the 1980s floods of the Keban dam.[21] They were standing at least until 1975, when Gabriel Boudoyan and Jean-Michel Thierry undertook architectural surveys at the site, the records of which form the basis of our knowledge.

One of the churches is a domed triconch, situated at the easternmost point of the village (Fig. 11).[22] The hands of time have altered its exterior appearance: while the dome shell and the drum are extant, the original conical roof and the sculpture of the cornice level have fallen away.[23] Renovations have also been made: initially composed of brick and mortar, the masonry preserves evidence of repairs executed with stone facing slabs. In particular, the western portal shows signs of dramatic rebuilding, revealing a series of phases in which the door opening was made successively smaller (Fig. 12). The original archway was constructed of bricks arranged in voussoirs; now, how-

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[20] Two niches are located in the east portion of the gavit's north wall, but their function is uncertain.

[21] *Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3084, C3.

[22] Maksoudian points out that the report by Gabriel Boudoyan and Jean-Michel Thierry confuses this church with a site near another village of Til, to the northwest of Palu (*Armenian Architecture*, 6, A-3084, C3).

[23] The drum features panels of different widths: the four panels of the main axis measure about 2 meters, while the diagonal panels measure only about 1.5 meters.

ever, a large horizontal lintel has been inserted below the arch.

Within the church, the central bay is surrounded by four arms: a short rectangular western bay and three apsidal forms to the east, north, and south (Fig. 13). These arms are covered with pointed barrel vaults which intersect at a dome on squinches. The inner shell of the dome, which was structurally intact at the time of the photograph, is constructed of concentric courses of brick, a technique more common to Byzantine than Armenian building traditions (Fig. 14). Further evidence for Greek presence at the church can be found in the program of wall painting decorating the interior. Although in a poor condition, some of the paintings preserve Greek inscriptions which have not been published. The images of the program, according to Boudoyan and Thierry, include a scene of the Annunciation in the south apse, and, in the squinches, portraits of Constantine and Helena. It is interesting to note that in the standard decorative program of Middle Byzantine churches, squinches generally bear scenes from the feast cycle. One is hence tempted to attribute the unusual prominence of Constantine and his mother to the monastery's possession of a relic of the Holy Cross, for it was Helena, according to tradition, who recovered the Cross. The style of the paintings, too, can be linked to Byzantine traditions: the figures have long, attenuated faces highlighted in a manner typical of Middle Byzantine painting. The presence of Greek construction practices, inscriptions, and painting style thus suggest that the church was a Byzantine rather than Armenian foundation.[24] The strong Greek presence in the area during the tenth and eleventh centuries provides further support for this thesis. Continued investigation of the site, if possible, and of the historical sources may shed light on this matter.

Slightly to the west of the structure is a second church, which is small and rectangular, measuring about 6 by 12 meters (almost 20 by 40 feet). Located on the west facade, the portal is a massive post and lintel construction, which supports a stone tympanum. The large

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[24] Boudoyan and Thierry argue that the paintings combined Byzantine and eastern elements, propose that the painters were Armenians working under the patronage of a Byzantine bishop, and date the program to the ninth or tenth century. As for the structure itself, the scholars suggest that it is either a seventh-century Armenian or a ninth-century Byzantine foundation. See Gabriel Boudoyan and Jean-Michel Thierry, "Les églises de Thil (Korluca) dans le vilayet de Tunceli (Turquie)," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 9 (1972): 179-92.

size of the blocks may indicate the age of the structure; at the fourth-century tomb of Aghts, similarly large monoliths were used in constructing the door frame.[25] A series of *khachkars* (sculpted cross stones) seems to have been inserted into the walls at a later date, a repair technique also employed at the domed basilica of Mren (seventh century) and the Monastery of Geghard (tenth to thirteenth centuries).

The interior is not divided by aisles but separated into eastern and western halves by a transverse rib resting on lateral pilasters. The eastern half of the structure terminates in two deep apses which are illuminated by windows piercing the thick walls of the east end (Fig. 15). These windows are decorated with sculpted Maltese crosses, and an additional cross was carved into a stone surmounting a pier separating the apses. The interior was originally plastered, covering over a heterogeneous construction technique: the barrel vaults appear to be randomly coursed, while the transverse arch is composed of stone voussoirs (Fig. 16). The plan of this church connects it to a family of bi-apsidal monuments in Armenia, which Thierry contends may have been used as double tombs for married couples.[26]

A cruciform church, located on the western side of Til, is the most historically and architecturally significant of the three. Dated by inscription to 986, the monument was in good condition at the time of the visit of Boudoyan and Thierry, still preserving its typically Caucasian profile: a conical roof above a polygonal drum, which rises from the intersection of four gabled arms (Fig. 17). The structure was not large, measuring only 10.5 meters (34.5 feet) in height from the top of the roof to the floor, and was composed of rubble masonry, using well-squared facing stones. A portal framed with massive blocks, most likely added to the original construction at a later date, formed

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[25] The antiquity of Aghts is attested to in two early histories: *The Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand (Buzandaran P'atmutiwnk')*, trans. and comm. Nina G. Garsoïan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), IV.24, p. 158; and Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, trans. and comm. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), III.27, p. 283. These texts testify to a fourth-century date for the tomb. For a summary of the monument as well as references for further reading, see Thierry and Donabédian, *Armenian Art*, and Suren Mnatsakanyan, *Haykakan vagh mijnadaryan memorial hushardzanner* [Armenian Early Medieval Memorial Monuments] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1982).

[26] Jean-Michel Thierry, "Les églises arméniennes à double abside," *Revue des études arméniennes*, n.s., 18 (1984): 515-49.

the entrance to the church, which is, interestingly, located on the southern, rather than western facade (Fig. 18). Striking, too, are the unequal lengths of the cross-arms: the western arm is almost twice the length of the southern. All the radiating spaces, however, are covered with barrel vaults which intersect at the drum. Single windows in the eastern apse, western arm, and alternating sides of the drum provide illumination.

Despite its appearance, which is characteristic of medieval Armenian churches, the structure appears to be a Syriac foundation. Maksoudian has noted that its surfaces are covered with Syriac epigraphy, including the tenth-century foundation inscription. According to the same scholar, the village of Til was known to have had connections to local Syriac communities: the area was a Jacobite episcopal center until the end of the sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century, Maksoudian notes, there were still seven Syriac churches located within the village. This connection may well explain the atypical southern entrance point of the church, which is a feature more common of Syriac than Armenian church planning, perhaps reflecting the exigencies of the Syriac rite.

The medieval monuments of Kharpert present a range of important architectural and historical problems to the study of medieval Armenian architecture. In some structures, such as the fortress of Kharpert and the bi-apsidal church of Til, local representatives of important trends in the development of Armenian architecture are found. Other structures, such as the monasteries of Khulavank and Surb Nshan, are testament to the enduring prominence of the region as a spiritual and cultural center. The two domed churches of Til, on the other hand, offer evidence for artistic exchange. While the triconch church features Greek inscriptions, elements of Byzantine painting, and Byzantine construction techniques, the cruciform structure seems to have been built for a local Syriac congregation, as evidenced in its epigraphy. Despite their significance, however, none of these monuments has enjoyed the scholarly limelight. Their closer consideration would enrich our understanding not only of the artistic and historical worlds of medieval Kharpert but also, more generally, the development of medieval building in Armenia.

Fig. 1. Fortress/Citadel of Kharpert

Fig. 2. Monastery of Khulavank

Fig. 3. Monastery of Khulavank: Portal

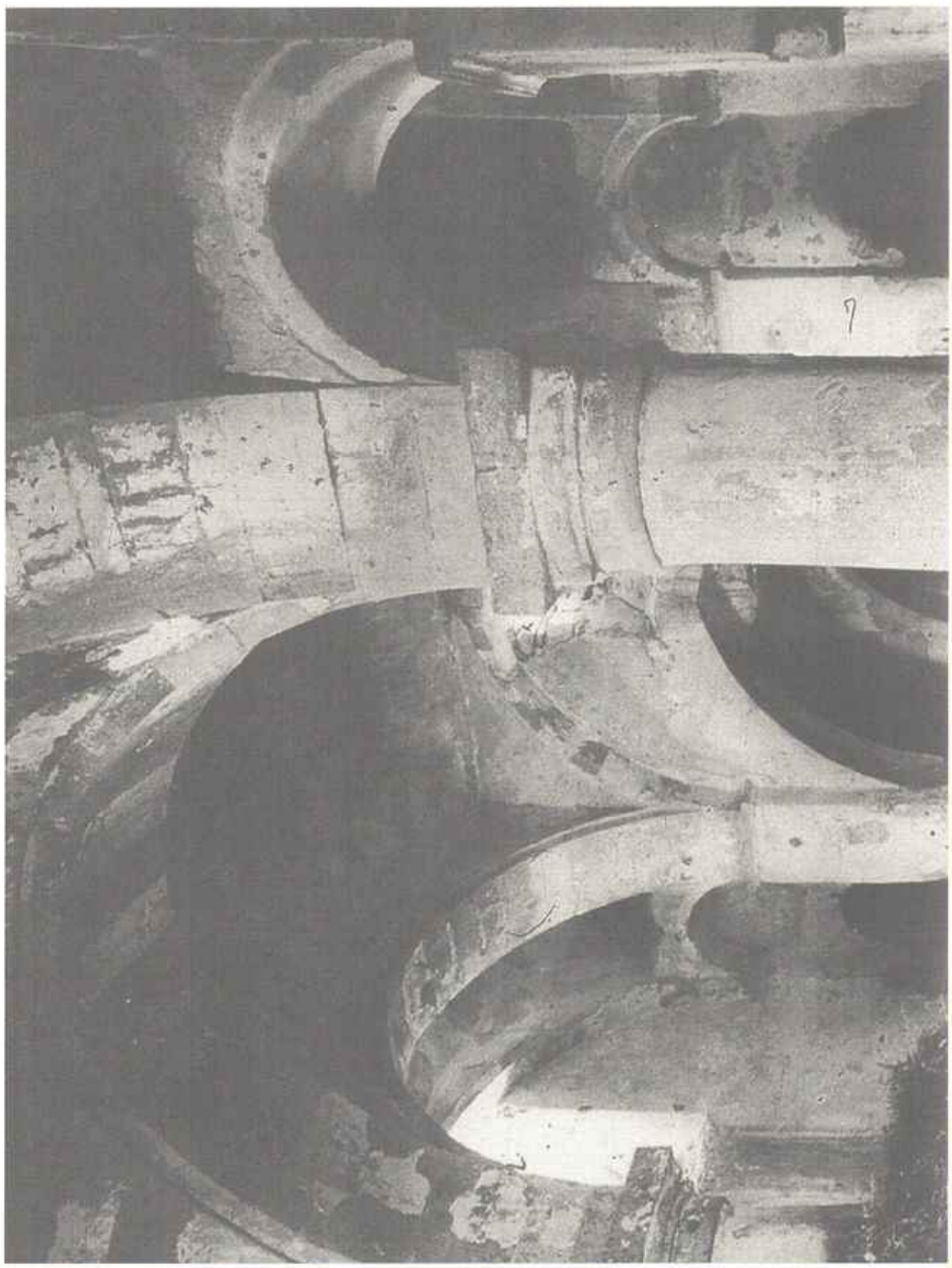

Fig. 4. Monastery of Khulavank: Interior

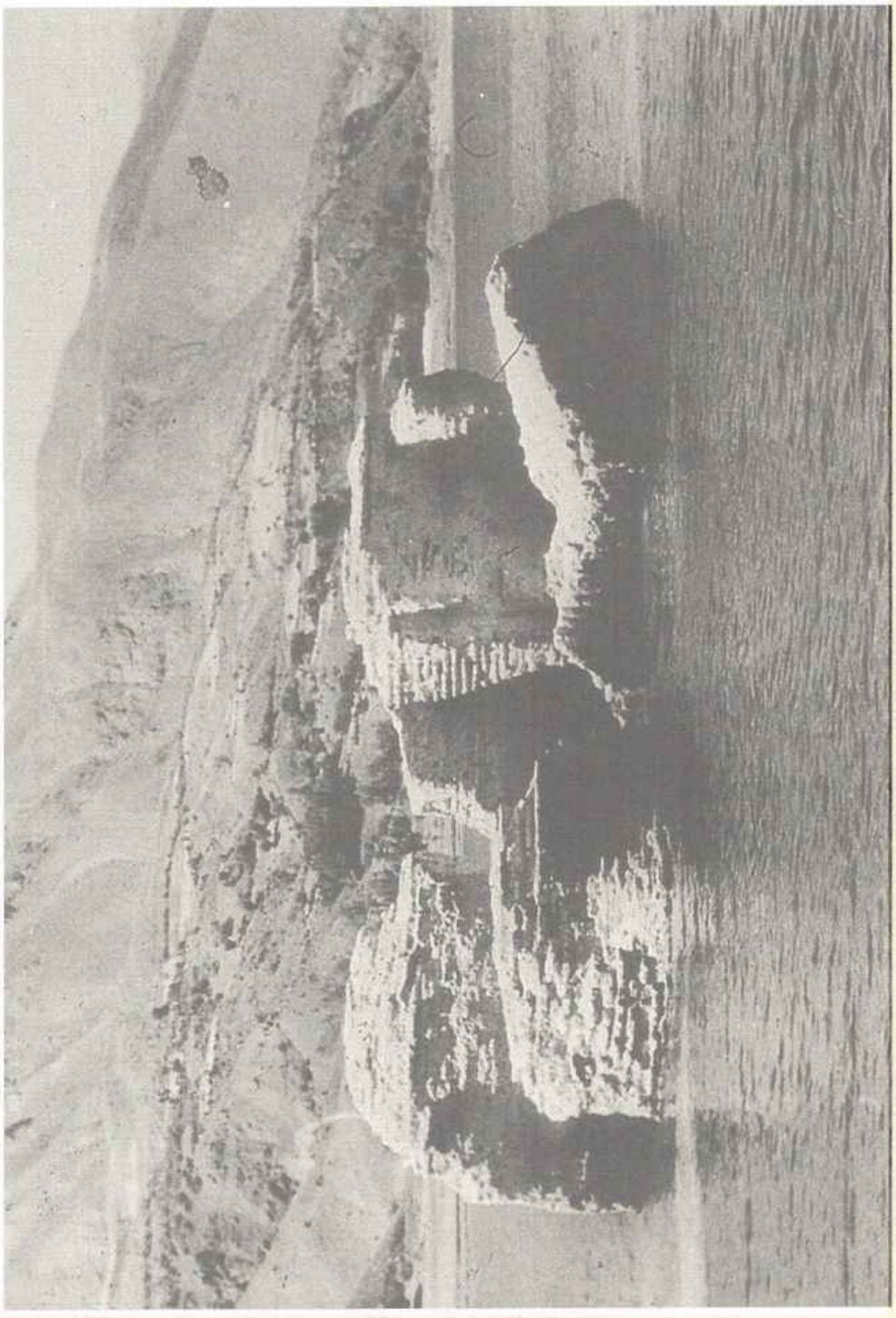

Fig. 5. Monastery of Surb Nshan at Tsopk

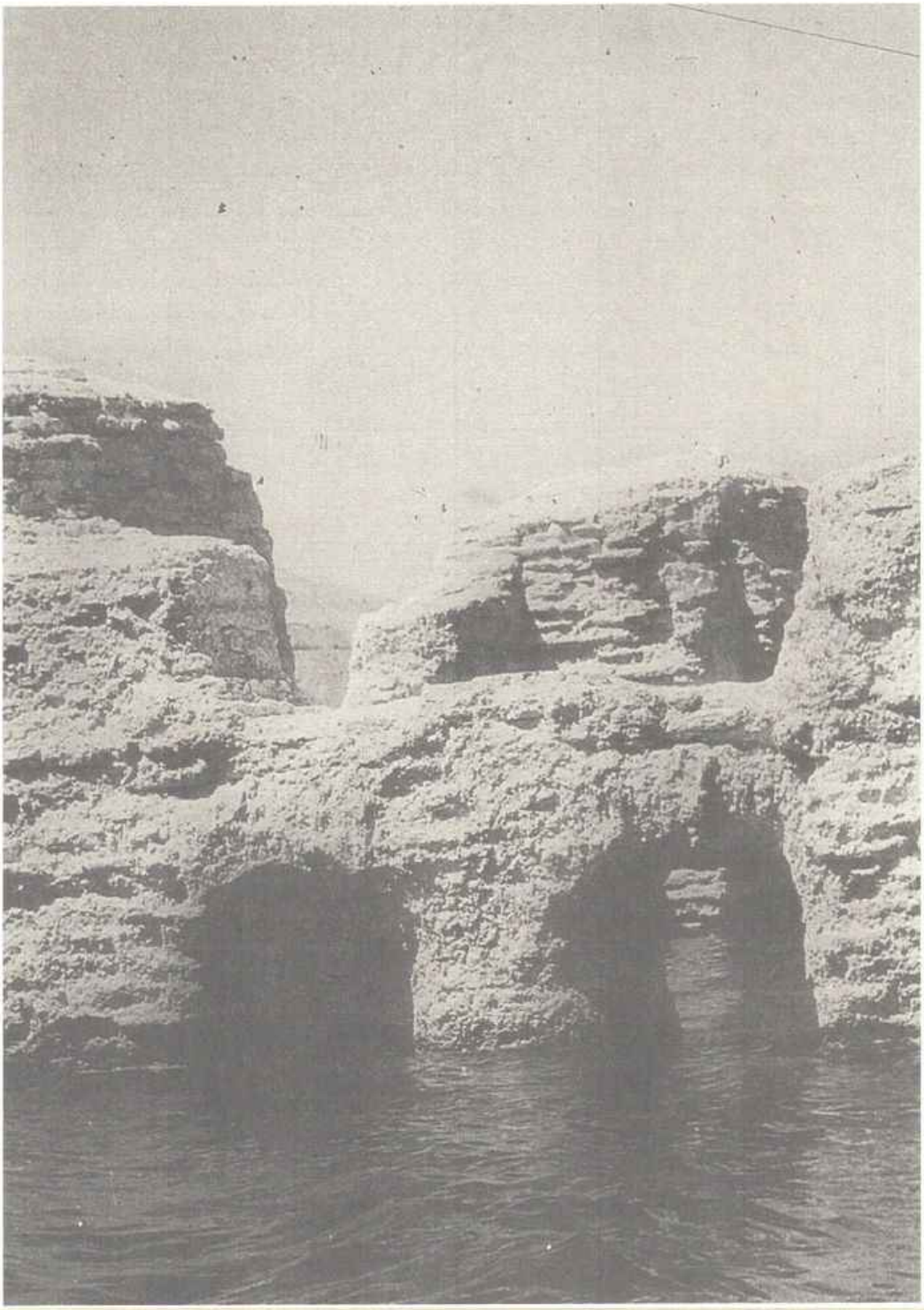

Fig. 6. Monastery of Surb Nshan at Tsopk

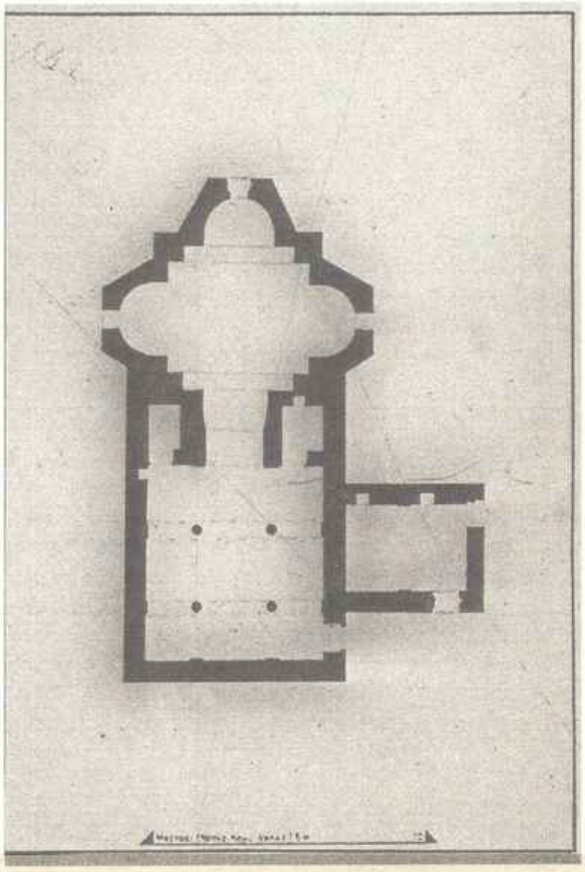

Fig. 7. Monastery of Datem (Tadem): Plan

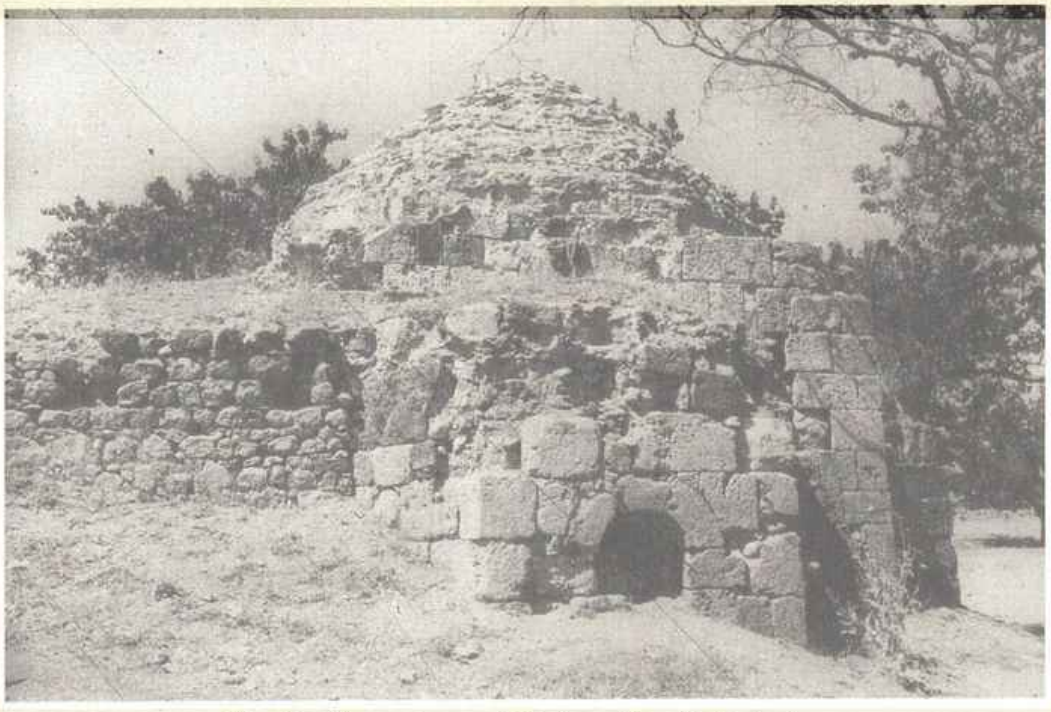

Fig. 8. Monastery of Datem: South Exterior

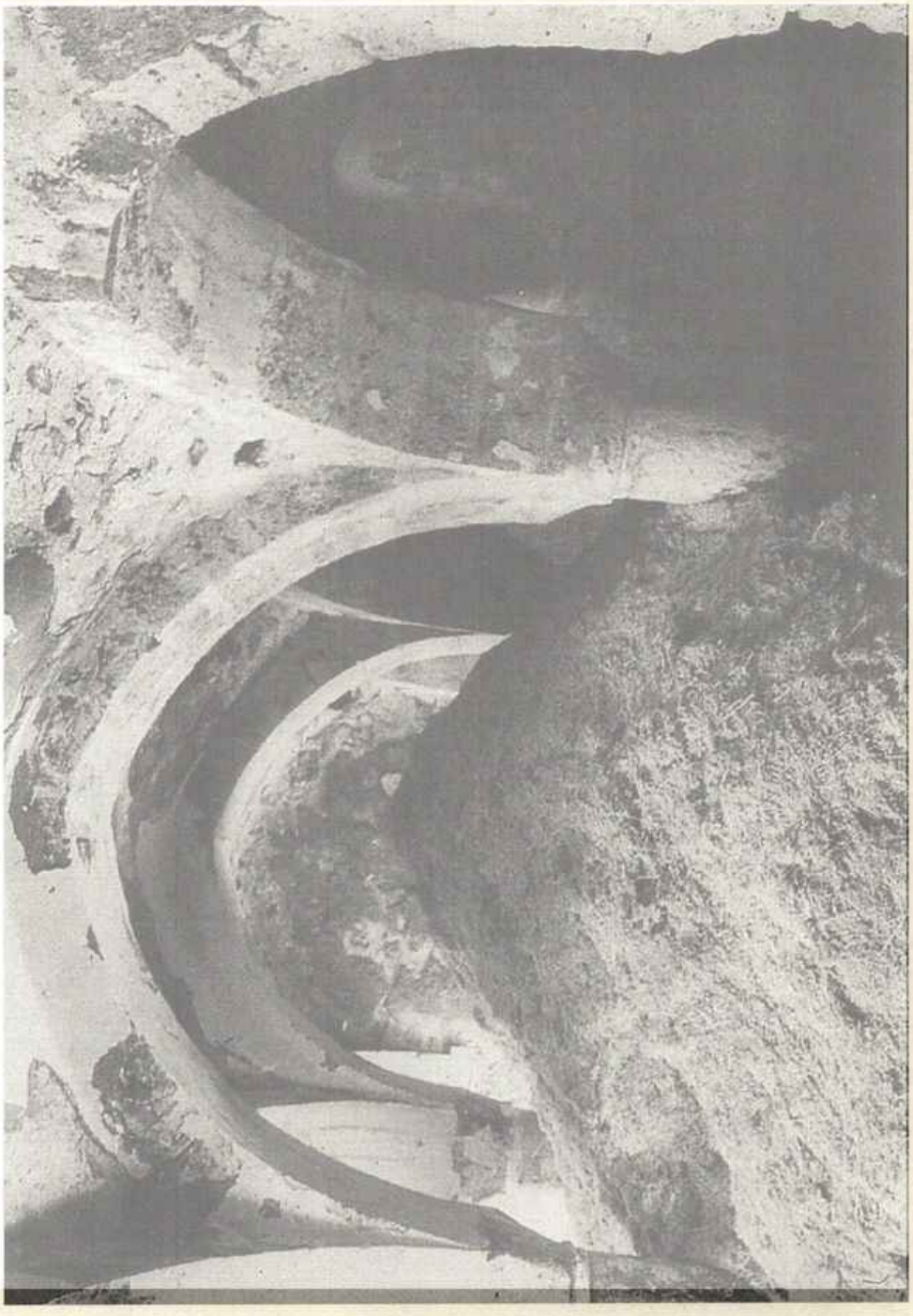

Fig. 9. Monastery of Datem: *Gavit* Interior

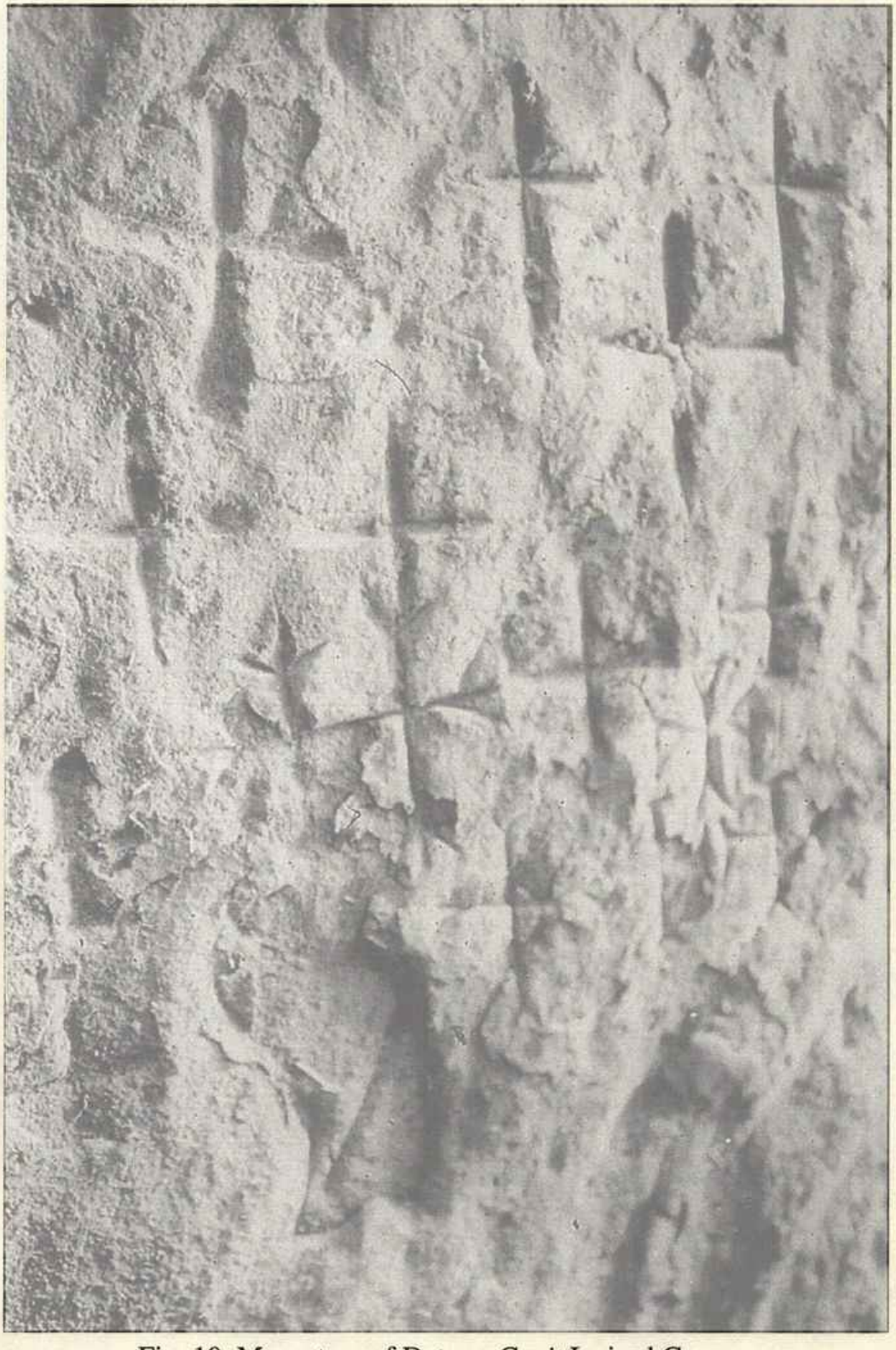

Fig. 10. Monastery of Datem: *Gavit* Incised Crosses

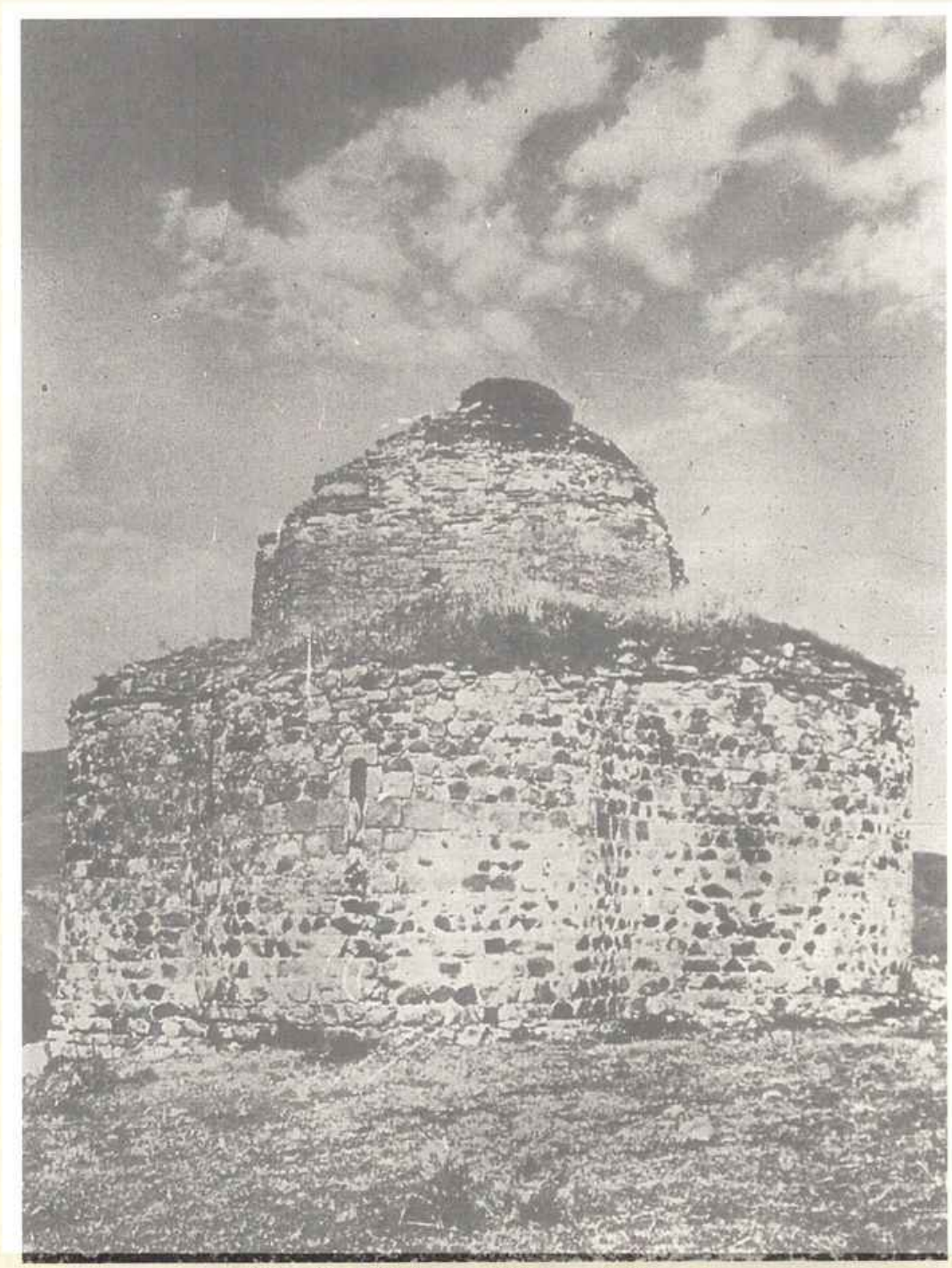

Fig. 11. Til: Domed Triconch Church

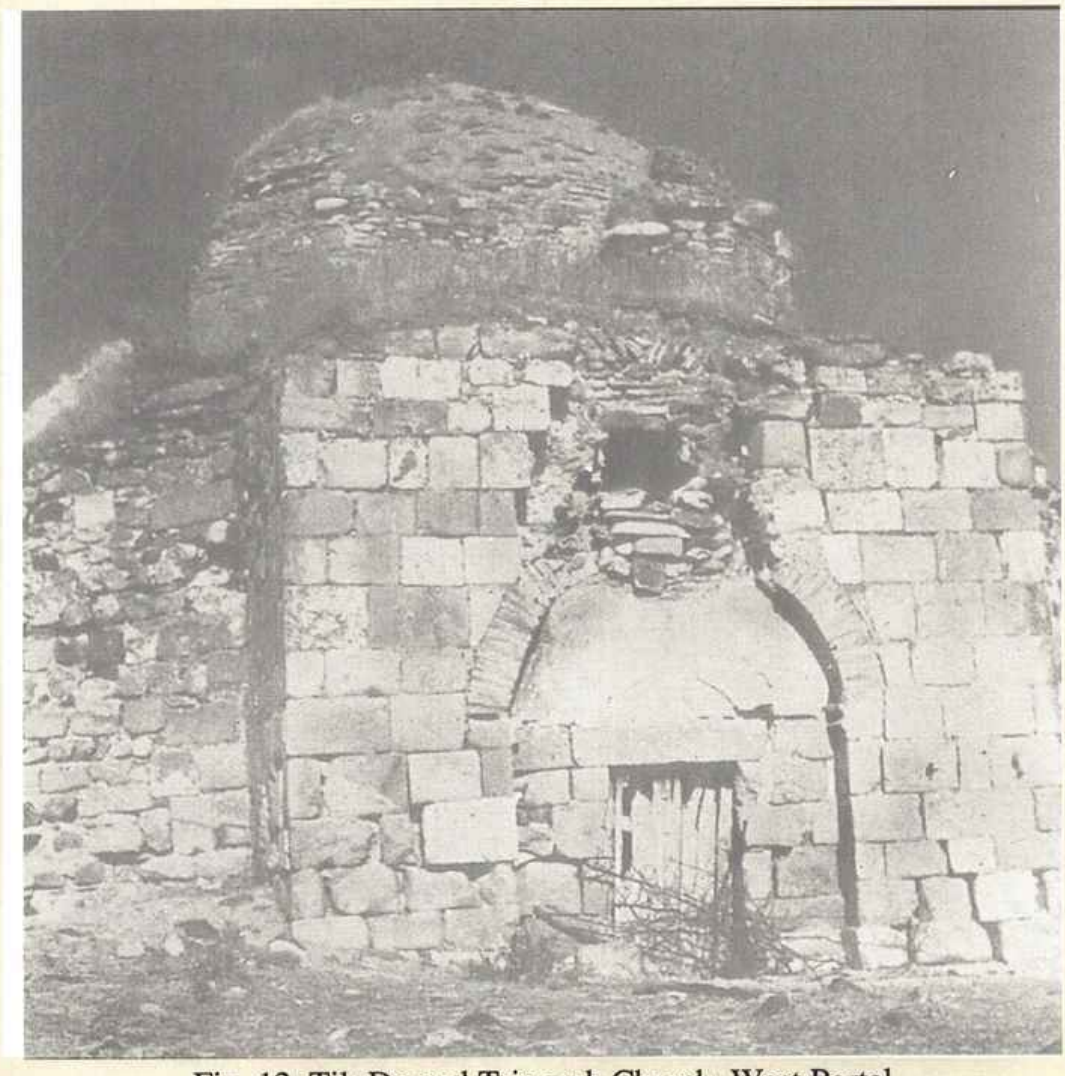

Fig. 12. Til: Domed Triconch Church, West Portal

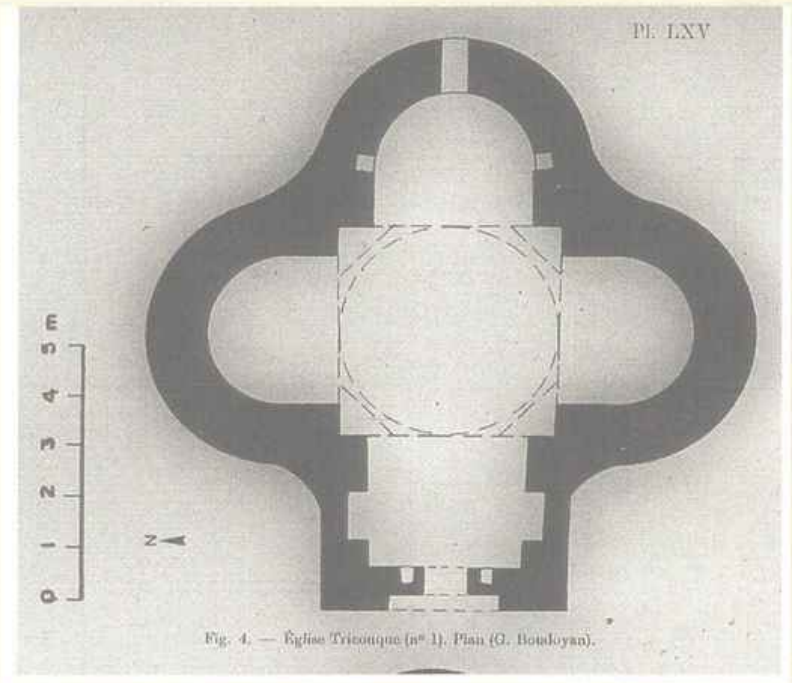

Fig. 13. Til: Domed Triconch Church, Plan

Fig. 14. Til: Domed Triconch Church, Dome Interior

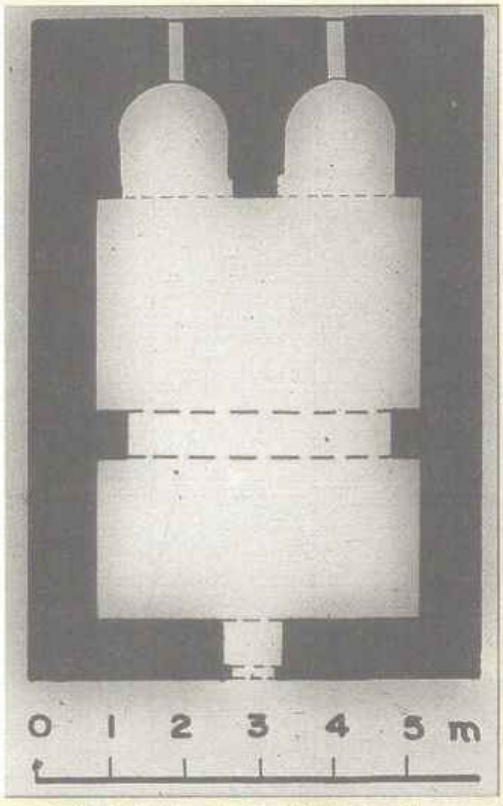

Fig. 15. Til: Bi-Apsidal Church, Ground Plan

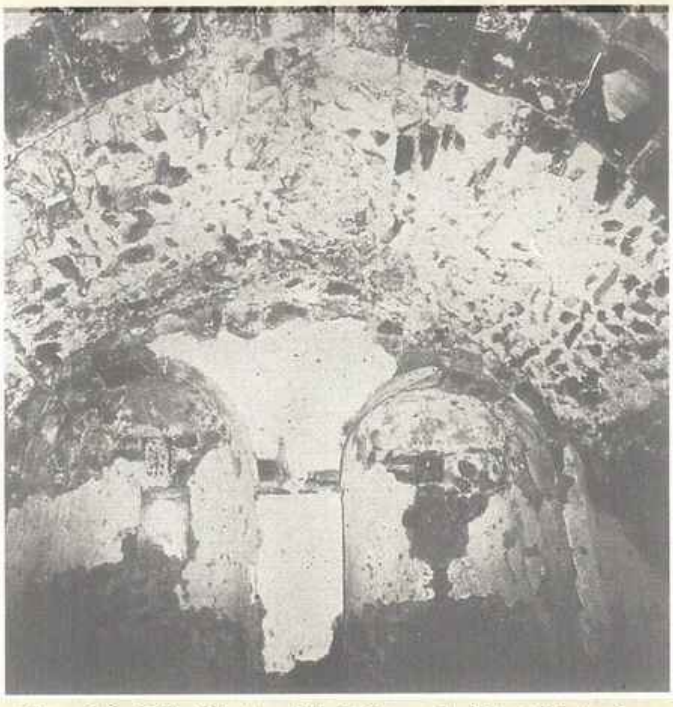

Fig. 16. Til: Bi-Apsidal Church, East Exterior

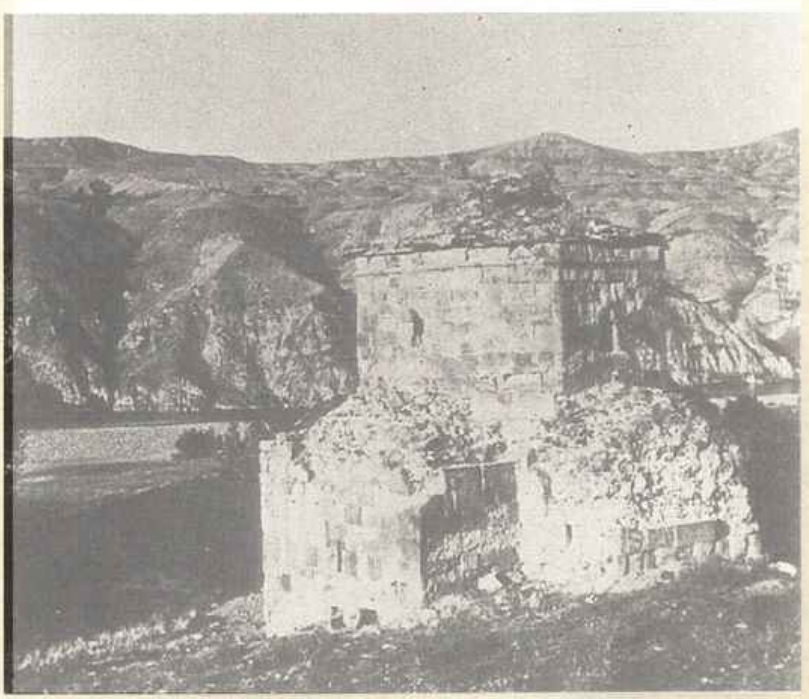

Fig. 17. Til: Domed Cruciform Church

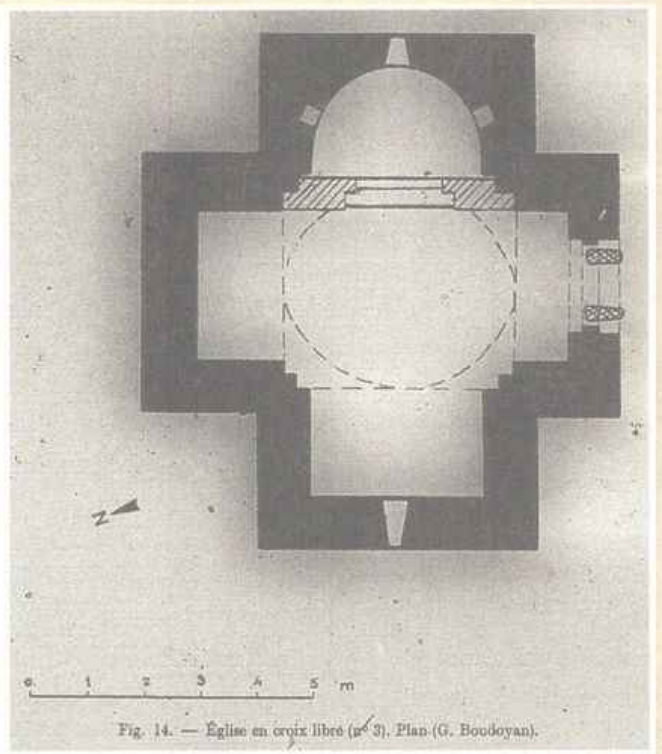

Fig. 14. — Église en croix libre (n° 3). Plan (G. Boudoyan).

Fig. 18. Til: Domed Cruciform Church, Plan